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Jason

*“O my country: What fond memories
I have of thee at this hour.”*

— Euripides, *Medea*

Once eating from her lips and skin
swearing by Zeus and the Olympians
vows to last forever.
Then hungering after richer fare
cold hellos, goodbyes, icy kisses.
Till in the heat of early afternoon,
cicadas worked into a frenzy,
he comes with news of fresh elopement.
There is no hope for what is dead,
no resurrecting father, brothers, homeland overseas.
Still, those who live will learn
what pains a lover takes with traitors.
First princess, indifferent to *her* sorrow,
will burn in robes of fire,
then children,
like unripe figs plucked from their mother’s breast,
will curse blade hurtling them to Hades,
while he, two-bit philanderer,
will end his days drifting from *taverna* to *taverna*,
spurned by the better whores,
scabrous at the foreskin.

Phaedra

*“Aphrodite! Now I see that she is not a mere
god but some force far mightier than that.”*

— Euripides, *Hippolytus*

She seeks him at night,
reaching hand across pillow,
brushing fireplace with fingertips.
The young man turns his flank,
smiles in his sleep, a scar on his left cheek
marks scenes of bitter argument last week
with his stepmother.
Over the house,
perfume of gardenias freshly blooming,
in the courtyard almond trees and lemons.
An unlit corridor separates the sweating woman
from her wish.

Iphigenia

Snow is falling over Montparnasse
as we leave the cinema,
sacrificial smoke still circling altar,
unseen blade.

Clytemnestra's eyes rage at the sailing fleet,
rehearsing vengeance for spouse's bloodied crown.
In this rendition no afterlife
no rendezvous at Tauris
where mad Orestes, fleeing his mother's furies,
can find solace in his sister's arms.

Alone she walks towards death
as she has done ten thousand times since that fateful year
when Spartan armies bearing down on Athens
gave playwright theme.

And if Cacoyannis takes liberties with the text
does it much matter
which of the gods or spiteful Calchas does her in?
Her corpse is but a testament
to that fine line separating barbarian from Greek,
civilization from its reptilian brain,
melting in the brazen heat of vanished Aulis.

Astyanax

*“Now Andromache ran to her bronze-clad
husband, and the nurse was with her,
holding a little boy in her arms, a baby son,
Hector’s bright star, Astyanax.”*

— *Iliad*, Book VI

Through battles thick she shielded him
far from swirling dust of plain
until the morning (he was still a babe)
she held him next to ramparts,
watching his father slain by Chiron’s charge, Peleus’s son.
What happened next is none too clear,
some say his widowed mother torn by grief
sought vengeance on the Spartan whore,
others that days were spent
between shrine and darkened home,
pouring libations for her cremated spouse.
When the hour came that Themis had foretold
he clung to apron strings hoping against hope
for reprieve from the blade.
Still five, he found each moment lengthening
as a youth, then man, then elder of his city
he won great glory for his father’s name
and heard his mother’s virtues sung.
Seized at last by savage hands he bared his breast,
showing how even children shortchange death.

Of the Ancients

Why do their legends seem embedded in our memes,
as though we were condemned to repeat
the hubris, the untamed erotic lust,
the wiliness, the misplaced trust
that so often spelled disaster?
The polis is no more,
the smoking altars,
the oracles with their cryptic pronouncements,
the Olympian Pantheon, the blind prophet.
Yet one plunges and re-plunges into a familiar matrix,
and listening to the Aegean
rolling in at evening on a tiny Pelion cove,
it is as though a Sophoclean chorus
were warning of approaching storms.